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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000385

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NEW CHINA CHRISTIAN COUNCIL PRESIDENT DISCUSSES CHALLENGES

REF: SHANGHAI 360

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Gao Feng, the new President of the China Christian Council (CCC), said during a September 2 meeting with Poloff that he would take steps to address challenges such as the insufficient number of pastors and churches and the lack of education opportunities for church workers and laymen, but he offered few plans on how to do so, and he acknowledged the difficulties faced by the CCC when competing with the private sector for a limited pool of talented and educated young people.

Gao said he sees positive signs of increasing interest in volunteerism among young people following the Sichuan earthquake and Beijing Olympics, and he hopes Chinese churches will be able to attract some of these volunteers and encourage them to further devote themselves to society. Gao, a Shandong native who is a newcomer to Shanghai, appeared tentative and unsure of himself -- often deferring to subordinates -- during the meeting. End Summary.

New Man in Town  
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¶2. (U) Gao Feng was elected President of the CCC in January 2008 for a five-year term. He previously served as President of the Shandong Christian Council in Jinan. According to Gao, the CCC's official figures now reflect that there are 16 million Christians and 55,000 churches in China. He cited the CCC's major challenges as improving theological education, expanding volunteer training and foreign exchange opportunities, and encouraging more social service.

¶3. (C) Gao was tentative and unsure, however, when he spoke outside the relative comfort of official national statistics. A newcomer to Shanghai, Gao admitted that he knew little about the Protestant community in the municipality, deferring to subordinates in the meeting for more information. According to other CCC officials in attendance, there are now approximately 200,000 Christians in Shanghai and 178 churches. There are more pastors in Shanghai than in many other urban centers in China, they said, but the ratio of pastors to individual Christians remains too low.

Facing the CCC's Challenges  
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¶4. (C) Gao acknowledged the many challenges faced by the CCC in

East China and throughout the country, but he offered few plans on how to solve the CCC's problems. (Comment: Gao's lack of vision in this regard and his perceived lack of experience is one of the major reasons religious contacts have criticized him in the past. See Reftel. End Comment.) In particular, Gao said he would like the CCC to focus on increasing the number of pastors and ensuring they have sufficient educational and training opportunities (including going abroad for further study). Laymen also need additional training, especially to bolster the CCC's social service projects.

¶15. (C) He admitted that recruiting young people to become pastors instead of businessmen is a major challenge for the CCC, particularly in East China where business opportunities at a much higher salary are plentiful. Thus it is difficult for the CCC to compete with the private sector for a limited pool of talented and educated young people. Gao was optimistic that the church is growing, however, and the CCC therefore will be able to attract a greater quantity of young people. Still, he remains concerned about the quality of young pastors and laymen, and he wants to train more pastors to meet young people's expectations.

#### Hope for Volunteerism

¶16. (C) Gao is hopeful that more young people are interested in volunteerism, particularly in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake and Beijing Olympics where so many young people contributed to something "bigger than themselves." Gao said he hopes Chinese churches will be able to attract some of these volunteers and encourage them to further devote themselves to society. Social services in nursing homes, autism centers, and HIV/AIDS prevention clinics are lacking in China, and the CCC needs to fill this void, Gao said.

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#### Comment

¶17. (C) Gao was unimpressive and rigid in the meeting and did not appear well-briefed. He was very polite and cordial, however, and expressed his interest in having more contact with Consulate officers. He has been criticized by others in the religious community for being a bureaucratic functionary without a long-term vision for the church (reftel), and on first glance, this criticism appears warranted. End Comment.

#### Bio Note

¶18. (C) Gao is 46 years old and a native of Jinan, where he spent the last five years as the President of the Shandong Christian Council. According to other CCC officials, both of Gao's parents also were Christian. Gao and his wife have one daughter. End Bio Note.

CAMP